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On the Importance of Religious Knowledge.

James Lusk
CIRCULAR LETTER

FROM THE
MINISTERS AND MESSENGERS

OF THE SEVERAL

BAPTIST CHURCHES

OF THE

YORKSHIRE AND LANCASHIRE ASSOCIATION,

Assembled at Bacup, June 9th and 10th,

1813,

Maintaining inviolably, the important doctrines of three equal persons in the Godhead; eternal and personal election; original sin; particular redemption; free justification by the imputed righteousness of Christ; efficacious grace in regeneration; the final perseverance of real believers; the resurrection of the dead; the future judgment; the eternal happiness of the righteous, and everlasting misery of such as die impenitent; with the congregational order of the churches;

To the several Churches they represent—

Meeting at Ackrington, Bacup, Blackburn, Cloughfold, Colne, Byram Street, Liverpool, Lime Street, Liverpool, York Street, Manchester, Ogden, Pendlehill, Preston, Rochdale, and Salendine Nook, LANCASHIRE; Barnoldswick, Bradford, Bramley, Chadderton, Gildersome, Halifax, Hebden Bridge, Leeds, Marsborough, Rastden, Rushworth, Sheffield, Sutton, Wainsgate, and York, YORKSHIRE; and at Burnham, STAFFORDSHIRE.

Grace be to you, and peace, from God our Father,
and from Jesus Christ our Lord.

DEAR BRETHREN,

THE fountain of religious knowledge is the sacred scriptures, and the author of it the divine spirit. Its nature is spiritual, and its operation purifying and exalting. The wisdom which is from above is pure, peaceable, gentle, easy to be entreated,

ed, full of mercy and of good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy. It is very different from speculation. Speculation has intellect for the sphere of its operation: there it begins, and there it terminates. But true wisdom renovates the heart, rectifies the affections, and reforms the conduct. Its energy lies in holy action.

The importance of religious knowledge will appear, from its influence on individuals, on churches, and on nations.

I. ITS INFLUENCE ON INDIVIDUALS.

1. Without it, no conviction of the evil nature and awful consequences of sin. *Men are alienated from the life of God through the ignorance which is in them.* They are blind to their hostility against God, their unwillingness to comply with the requisitions of his law, and their exposure to the righteous displeasure of the lawgiver. But the law of God, brought to bear on the conscience by divine energy, removes this dangerous ignorance. The purity, goodness, and equity of its precepts are seen and felt. Discovering in this polished and spotless mirror the true character of God, the sinner learns his own obligations to love and worship and obey him. And thence he ascertains the nature and perfection of that obedience which the law requires as the only ground of his acceptance, and his own utter incapacity to furnish that righteousness. Under divine guidance, he is ultimately brought, to justify the law and condemn himself, to renounce all his pleas of self acquittal and self dependence, and from a genuine sense of his lost condition, to seek for pardoning mercy and sanctifying grace through a mediator.

2. Knowledge is essential to the exercise of faith in Christ. *By his knowledge, shall my righteous servant justify many, for he shall bear their iniquities.* No man can confide in an unknown saviour. *They who know thy name will put their trust in thee.* Unbelief thrives in the soil of mental darkness; faith lives and strengthens amidst the rays and heat of celestial light. *God who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, shines in the heart to give the light of the knowledge of his glory in the face of Jesus Christ.* This divine influence convinces the sinner, that his conduct has dishonoured God's law, offended his justice, and insulted his government. He cannot indulge the hope of pardon, being dispensed at the dishonour of that law and those perfections on which he has been long pouring contempt. Reason suggests no plan in which justice and mercy can combine in his salvation. How great are his wonder and joy when he finds such a plan revealed in the gospel. The spirit illuminates his mind to behold the law of God magnified by the obedience, the justice of God satisfied by the sufferings of Jesus Christ. *By the deeds of the law shall no flesh be justified. But now the righteousness of God without the law, is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets, even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto and upon all them who believe.* Him hath God set forth to be a propitiation, through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness in the remission of sins, that he may be just, and the justifier of him who believes in Jesus. The sinner thus enlightened in the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, ravished with the excellencies of the Savi-

our, the suitableness of his salvation, the freeness and sincerity of his invitations, dares no longer remain at a distance; but ventures nigh, and casts his soul on the power and mercy of Christ. *I will trust and not be afraid; Jehovah is become my salvation.*

3. No participation of the benefits springing from union with Christ, in a state of ignorance. The charter which contains and reveals them must be studied, their importance ascertained, and their worth prized before they can be sought after, obtained, or enjoyed. Many and valuable are these benefits; the spirit of adoption to teach, and guide, and sanctify, and comfort; access to a throne of grace in all circumstances; communion with God; enlargement of heart in the path of duty; victory over every spiritual foe; sanctified afflictions and sanctified prosperity; salutary ordinances; recovery from backsliding; preservation from every real evil; a safe death; an honourable entrance into the eternal realms of purity and felicity. One great end of the new testament dispensation is, that the joy of God's children may be FULL. To partake of these rich blessings, we must feel our need of them, and diligently seek them; we must learn their place in God's œconomy, and study the way in which he imparts the enjoyment of them to his people.

4. No evident growth in grace, or zealous devotedness to Christ, without a large share of religious knowledge. *Grace and peace are multiplied to us through the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour. All things pertaining to life and godliness, are given to us through the knowledge of him who hath called us to glory and virtue.*

The present time is not marked by prosperity in our churches. How desirable it would be to see our meetings thronged with crouds of perishing men, crying out, *what shall we do to be saved*; and with multitudes pressing to the sacred and delightful ordinance of baptism, to enjoy visible fellowship with Christ in his death and resurrection!—It is to be feared that too many among us, walk as enemies to the cross of the Saviour, glorying in their shame, minding earthly things, and making a god of their bellies; whose end is destruction.—The radical cure of these evils is to be found in *divine influence*. But when God's spirit is poured out abundantly, he operates as a spirit of truth and light, of burning and judgment.

Would we run our prescribed race with patience and success, we must look to Jesus the author and finisher of our faith. We must study their lives, their trials, their graces, if we would be followers of them who through faith and patience are now inheriting the promises. We cannot reckon the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of the world; nor prefer the durable afflictions of the church to the temporary pleasures of sin, without seeing him, who is invisible, without having respect to the recompence of reward. It is when we look at divine and eternal objects as they are revealed to us; that we reckon the sufferings of the present times not worthy to be compared with the glory that shall follow. He who is changed into the same image, beholds in its glass the glory of the Lord. In him who loves and follows the Saviour, the word of Christ dwells richly in all spiritual wisdom. The rays of that sun which God

has placed in the firmament of the scriptures, enlighten and warm and fructify the heart.

5. Scripture knowledge essential to salvation. *This is eternal life to know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent.* It is the dawn of that day which shall shine forth in eternal light and felicity. It is the first work of the mighty Spirit, when he broods over the chaos of an unconverted heart. He says, let there be light; and having separated between the light and the darkness, he never interrupts the progress of his operation, till he pronounces *all* to be very good.

II. CONSIDER THE INFLUENCE OF RELIGIOUS KNOWLEDGE ON CHURCHES.

1. It is essential to the being of a church. An association of persons professing christianity, and agreeing to hold communion with each other in the ways which shall seem good in their own eyes, *is not a church.* A church is a society regulated according to scripture model. And that model may be learned from the laws of Christ, from the practice of the apostles, and their letters to the disciples. The laws of Christ, as explained and applied by his apostles, being the result of infinite wisdom and love, are like the dispensation to which they belong, immutable in every age. They admit of no modification from human customs. They are fitted for a spiritual empire, which subsists among nations independent of them, and unmoved by their changes.

Alas! how many of Christ's disciples are ignorant of his will? Their connection with societies exceedingly corrupt, their attachment to human es-

tablishments of religion, can only be attributed to their ignorance. Were they acquainted with Christ's kingdom and the peculiarity of its constitution, they could not refuse to unite with his obedient subjects, without forfeiting their claims to consistency at least, if not to personal godliness.

2. It is requisite for the maintenance of order and peace in the churches.—When a church is formed, the paths in which the members shall walk is prescribed by their legislator. They are not left to choose the *manner* in which they shall glorify Christ. The office of pastor to teach and rule; the office of deacon to visit and relieve the poor; all the institutions, by the observance of which the church is to be edified; derive their obligations from the appointment of Christ. Whence spring the mournful differences in forms of worship which have divided and still divide God's people? men neglect the salutary laws of Christ. As neither health nor spirits can be enjoyed without attention to diet and exercise, so, in a church, neither vigour nor liveliness can be maintained where the prescriptions of the Saviour are overlooked. The laws of Christ are so framed, as to secure the great ends for which churches are formed; but if they are set aside, and human inventions substituted in their room, we need not wonder that churches suffer from the change.

3. Knowledge is needful to correct the abuses to which every church is liable. No christian has attained to spotless purity; nor does any church, even the best regulated, enjoy a total exemption from imperfection and irregularity. Hypocrites and unbelievers intrude; through whose influence churches

suffer many evils. Offences thus arise. How are these morbid humours to be expelled, that the body may regain its just tone and vigour? How shall the bitter weeds be eradicated, that the sacred plants may grow and prosper? If discipline be totally neglected, confusion and every evil work will abound and prevail. If discipline be exercised, on other grounds, according to other rules, and for other ends than those which are evidently authorised by the new testament, the remedy will aggravate the malady.

It is readily granted, that a kind and forbearing spirit will do much in maintaining order and expelling evils. Love will cover a multitude of sins. But *love alone* is insufficient: she needs the steady arm of wisdom and experience, to guide her feet in the way of peace.

Every institution merely human has in its frame the seeds of decay and mortality. But Christ's words are spirit and life; his laws have immortality stamped on them; an inextinguishable principle imparted to them from their author preserves them from death, under all the rubbish which human wisdom and pride have thrown on them. Animated by his energy, they live under the incumbent pressure, and often throw off the burden.

Let the laws of Christ be studied in their own simplicity, and observed in their own spirit, and our churches would soon rise superiour to many of the difficulties under which they now labour.

4. Knowledge is indispensable to promote the cause of Christ at large.—Churches are members of one body, and should closely be united. Gifts

and graces are imparted from Christ to individuals, not for their own sake merely, but for the advantage of their brethren. Several persons may be qualified for the work of the ministry, in a community which may not need their services. They may be destined for long and multifarious labours in other parts of the sacred enclosure, or in the wide field of the desert world. To estimate the true condition of the churches at large, to learn their wants, to ascertain the best methods of alleviating their evils, or promoting their advantage, much information acquired by patient investigation, must combine with an enlarged mind and cultivated talents. Schemes of general utility are to be devised, matured and maintained. Seminaries of useful and sacred literature are to be founded, and supported, and extended.

Ignorance limits and contracts, knowledge enlarges and widens the circle of human exertion. As a man of cultivated mind advances in the field of benevolence, the opportunities of doing good multiply around him, and the means of carrying his designs into effect come successively under his notice.

III. THE INFLUENCE OF RELIGIOUS KNOWLEDGE ON NATIONS.

At the present crisis, when public notice is so much drawn to christianity, and politicians are compelled to decide on its merits, it may not be unsuitable to state briefly a few instances in which christian knowledge essentially and triumphantly ameliorates the state of civil society.

1. Religious knowledge confirms the unsophisticated dictates of conscience. Conscience is one

of God's scribes in a fallen world, and writes the work of his law on the heart of man. But deep as are the incisions of conscience on the human heart, passion, interest, depraved feeling, bad example, early prejudices, separately and unitedly, erase the signature. Scripture comes to the aid of conscience, and by inculcating that the love of God and the love of man are the life and essence of every moral precept, she strengthens her voice, and consecrates and ratifies her every dictate.

2. It rectifies, when debased, the standard of morals. Sin has introduced much confusion into the mind of man, and into the frame of human society. It has defaced the pristine beauty of God's works, discomposed the machine of nature, and thrown a mysterious vail over the operations of providence. It has rudely snapt the bonds of harmony, which otherwise would have united individuals, and families, and nations, and the universe in one body of love. The scriptures reveal the original and proper state of things, and enforce all the obligations which result from the relations subsisting between God and man, between one man and another. They exhibit a standard of duty, supreme and beyond appeal, by which all others are to be tried, and on which no considerations of interest or policy are to induce any modification. The observation of that one precept, *Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself*, would afford a potent remedy for every evil under which humanity groans.

Where, but from the bible, do we learn that forgiveness is the noblest revenge, and that evil is to be vanquished with good; that humility is true

greatness, and that the fear of God is at once the beginning and the perfection of wisdom?

3. It supplies the deficiency of human law.—The imbecility of legislation to prevent or restrain effectually, the commission of crimes, has been often felt, and often acknowledged. The spring of man's depravity is too powerful to be compressed by the weights of legal restraint. The fire of inward corruption is too fierce to be extinguished by all the floods which philosophy and policy can supply. A sinner under the mighty sway of his passions, does not stand in awe of his fellow creatures; he scorns their esteem, and overlooks their vengeance. Laws have been multiplied, and their penalties aggravated in vain. Sin in her wild career, easily overleaps the low boundaries of legal prohibition. But God's law encompasses men with a fence in which is no gap. It brings them to a tribunal from which is no appeal, to a Judge whom it is impossible to deceive, or mislead, or terrify, or corrupt. And it is fortified by a penalty, *Everlasting destruction from the presence of God and the glory of his power*, to which nothing, when it is known and believed, can be supposed comparable.

4. Religious knowledge is the nurse of every charity. Avert thy eyes, thou classic scholar, thou enthusiastic admirer of antiquity, and explore the venerable remains of Greece and Rome. You will find their libraries enriched with the ablest productions of intellect, their cities adorned with the noblest monuments of ingenuity and taste. You will see every where the traces of their religion; spacious temples, costly shrines, idols of exquisite workmanship, smoking altars, sacrificing priests,

and trains of pompous ceremonies. Neither riches, nor labour, nor perseverance, was spared to effect what their superstitions dictated. The blood of their children was not withheld to appease the anger, and procure the favour of their diabolical deities. But where, in all this dreary waste, can the eye rest on hospitals for suffering humanity, on asylums for sickness and misfortune, for widowhood and age? Their academic porticoes, the cloisters of their temples, afforded no room, furnished no convenience for the accommodation and relief of their unfortunate fellow creatures. Blinded reason has taught man *to make and worship an idol*: his *ardent passions* have taught him to invent, and forge, and employ *weapons* of war: but the gospel has taught him to worship his maker, to convert the weapons of war into the implements of husbandry, and to promote the happiness of the wretched, instead of the misery of the happy.

The pure and benign light of the gospel has covered this highly favoured land with charities of every description. To every species of wretchedness, there is a species of relief; and love delights to adapt her remedies to the various maladies under which her objects labour.

5. Religious knowledge patronizes learning, liberty, and commerce. These are children of one family. Ignorance is their worst enemy. She has attacked them in all ages, and obtained many signal victories over them. Under the dusky banners of ignorance, the inquisition has reared his walls, dug his dungeons, forged his instruments of torture, and immured, judged, condemned and murdered his helpless victims. Under her patronage,

persecution has, in all ages, fattened on the flesh and blood of the martyrs. When popery prevailed in Europe with her impious doctrines, idolatrous rites, and infernal spirit, and the faithful witnesses were compelled to prophecy in sackcloth; Ignorance then sat on the throne of authority. The scriptures were sealed up, and freedom of enquiry was the symptom of heresy. The antichristian clergy were lords of the world, and princes obeyed their mandates. And in return, spiritual power forged the chains of civil tyranny. At last, after a long and dreary night of darkness, God commanded the light of knowledge again to visit an unworthy world. Her piercing rays discovered the monsters in their den, and zeal dragged them forth to the notice and revenge of an injured public. The glorious æra of the reformation was equally distinguished for the prevalence of religious knowledge, of classical learning, of civil liberty, and extended commerce. Religious knowledge is the friend of them all. She encourages freedom of enquiry. She thrives in the soil of liberty, of philosophy, of commerce. She pines amidst scenes of war and cruelty. She teaches that all men are of one family, made of one blood, and partakes of the same spiritual maladies, that they are all accountable to the same judge, and all destined for immortality. She teaches and inspires an universal philanthropy, by revealing that Christ died for men of all nations, and that in due time the kingdoms of this world shall become the spiritual empire of God's son.

IV. IMPROVEMENT.

1. Is the knowledge of divine things essential to salvation?—Enquire whether the spirit of God has

revealed to you, what eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor heart conceived, even what God has prepared for them who love him? Examine closely whether your knowledge be theoretic or experimental, the result of education, or of rational investigation only, or the effect of divine influence, and pious research. If your knowledge be the gift of God, it is discriminated by broad marks. If your understanding be enlightened from above, you see the reality, the importance, the beauty, the holiness of divine objects. Your eye will be fixed on the redeemer as the centre and life, the alpha and omega of all revealed truth. And your acquaintance with Jesus Christ will be manifested by strong desires after his favour, by dependence on his atonement, by regard to his character, by conformity to his example, by devotedness to his service.

2. Is christian knowledge of importance to churches?—Encourage a pious and learned ministry. Christian ministers are divinely appointed to convey instruction to the churches, and are stars in the hand of Christ to reflect his lustre on all around them. An ignorant ministry soon becomes contemptible. Without a superiority of knowledge, how can a pastor interpret God's word, remove its difficulties, reconcile its apparent clashing, unfold its mysteries, impart its treasures? Next to piety and the love of Christ, solid scripture knowledge holds the chief place in the ministerial character. It is an indispensable requisite, and is only to be obtained by reading, reflection and prayer, judiciously directed, regularly practised, and perseveringly maintained.

Let young ministers examine the lives of our venerable reformers, or respectable puritans. These men devoted their early years to the acquisition, and their maturer years to the communication of solid knowledge. Before they commenced their spiritual building, they spent much time and took great pains in digging the foundation and collecting materials.

3. Is knowledge of great benefit to the world?

Let missionary, and tract, and bible, and itinerant societies, enjoy your liberal and steady patronage. The extension of divine knowledge through the world, is both a harbinger of the Millennium and one of its grandest attendants. The spiritual reign of Christ on earth, for 1000 years, over Jews and Gentiles, over all nations, over all families in every nation, shall be introduced as well as maintained by the universal diffusion of divine truth, Dan. xii. Many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall be increased, Matth. xxiv. 14, *And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached throughout all the world, for a testimony to all nations, and then shall the end come.* The empire of satan having been set up, and continued, and extended by ignorance and error, that wicked one shall be destroyed by the breath of Christ's mouth, and the *brightness of his coming.* The shadows of death, under which the old dragon of paganism, and the wild beast of popery have been lurking, for so many centuries, to catch and tear their prey, shall be forever dispelled by the meridian splendour of the gospel sun. When by his pure and steady light, the clouds of error and the fogs of ignorance have been completely dissipated, then shall the prophecy be fulfilled, *The earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.*

MINUTES OF THE ASSOCIATION,
Held at Bacup, near Rochdale, June 9th & 10th,
1813.

June 9th. Half past two o'Clock, P. M. Assembled, and began with singing. Brother *Hirst* prayed. Brother *Stephens* was chosen Moderator. The letters from the churches were read. The newly formed churches at *Meltham House*, and *Haslingden*, and the church at *Wigan*, solicited union with the Association. Brother *Mann* concluded.

Evening, half past six. Brother *Littlewood* prayed. Brother *Nathan Smith* preached from Isaiah lxii. 1. Brother *Lister* read the Circular Letter, on the Importance of Religious Knowledge, and concluded in prayer.

June 10th, half past six, morning. Met for prayer. *Grey*, of *Blackburn*, *Tricket*, of *Bramley*, and *Symonds* of *Wigan*, engaged in the devotional exercises.

Resolved by the ministers and messengers:

1. That the Circular Letter drawn up by Brother *Lister*, be printed.
2. That the churches at *Haslingden*, *Meltham House*, and *Wigan* be received into the Association.
3. That it be recommended to the churches to form penny a week societies, for the furtherance of the gospel.

4. That the churches be desired to nominate in their future letters to the Associations, the person or persons appointed by them as their messenger or messengers, the number of their members, and the number of the circular letters wanted.

5. That the next Association be held at *Hebden Bridge*, Brethren *Littlewood*, *Steadman*, and *Stephens* to preach, and in case of failure, *Edwards* and *Downes*.

Ten, forenoon. Brother *Macfarlane* prayed; Brother *Hargreaves* preached from Job xxxiv. 2, 3.; and Brother *Fisher* from Heb. xiii. 17. Brother *Lister* concluded in prayer.

The subject of next year's Circular Letter to be *The nature and importance of the work of the Spirit on the heart*; to be drawn up by Brother *Mann*.

State of the Churches since the last Association.

	INCREASE.			DECREASE.			Members.	Letters.
	Baptized.	By Letter.	Restored.	Dead.	Dismissed.	Excluded.		
Ackrington,.....	9	..	..	1	..	..	118	100
Bacup,.....	..	..	..	2	..	..	97	100
Barnoldswick,.....	..	..	..	1	..	..	..	40
Bradford,.....	8	1	1	3	2	6	198	80
Blackburn,.....	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..
Burslem,.....	..	1	..	2	..	2	41	36
Bramley,*.....	2	..	..	2	..	..	108	72
Cloughfold, no letter,..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..
Colne,.....	..	..	..	..	..	..	21	30
Cowlinghill,.....	4	..	..	1	..	..	65	30
Gildersome, no letter,..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..
Halifax,.....	3	..	..	1	2	..	97	36
Hebden Bridge,.....	8	..	..	4	..	..	120	66
Leeds,.....	1	..	..	1	..	..	..	60
Liverpool, Byrom Street,	6	2	..	1	..	1	140	50
Liverpool, Lime Street,†	6	..	..	3	..	1	85	..
Manchester, York Street,	9	2	..	..	..	..	66	50
Masborough, no letter,..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..
Ogden,.....	5	1	..	2	..	..	86	90
Pendlehill,.....	..	..	..	1	..	..	..	..
Preston,.....	2	..	..	..	..	3	15	20
Rawden,.....	3	..	..	2	..	..	28	24
Rochdale,.....	8	..	..	..	..	1	115	60
Rushworth, no letter,..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..
Salendine Nook,.....	4	..	..	4	..	..	125	70
Sheffield,.....	4	..	..	3	..	2	..	50
Sutton,.....	4	2	..	1	..	..	..	60
Wainsgate,.....	3	..	..	..	..	..	27	30
York,.....	3	..	..	..	1	..	22	12
	92	9	1	35	5	18		

* One sent out to the ministry. † Two sent out to the ministry.

INCREASE.

Baptized,.....	92
Received by Letter,.....	9
Restored,.....	1

DECREASE.

Dead,.....	35
Dismissed,.....	5
Excluded,.....	18

102

Clear increase, 44.

58

Printed by J. Lang, Drury Lane, Water Street, Liverpool.

[Handwritten text, mostly illegible due to heavy scribbles and crossing out. Some words like "The" and "and" are visible.]

7 17 5
12 15

8 9 10

3 14 10

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4 15 3

4 15 0

4 15 0

4 15 0

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5 7 8

9 7 10

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6 5

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